



Local

TripAdvisor halts Turtle Centre ticket sales

By Tad Stoner - May 23, 2017

TripAdvisor, among the world’s top tourist websites, stopped selling tickets to the Cayman Turtle Centre over the weekend, saying it was “not compliant” with the Massachusetts-based organization’s animal welfare booking policy.

While TripAdvisor’s Senior Director for Corporate Communications Brian Hoyt did not say how many Cayman Turtle Centre tickets the website had sold, he confirmed that it would no longer book tickets to “hundreds of attractions across the globe where tourists come into physical contact with captive wild animals or endangered species.” Both criteria apply to the West Bay facility.

He minimized potential financial implications to TripAdvisor, saying “this policy change was not material to TripAdvisor revenues.”

The move comes on the heels of an April 25 petition launched by the London-based World Animal Protection organization, asking Carnival Cruise Lines, among the world’s largest, to stop recommending the Turtle Centre as a tourist destination.

Neil D’Cruze, senior wildlife adviser at World Animal Protection, said the Carnival petition, calling the Cayman Turtle Centre “one of the top 10 cruellest wildlife tourist attractions” in the world, had already gained 90,000 signatures.

He said the TripAdvisor move, while independent of the petition, had been “given a sense of urgency” by the Carnival appeal.

TripAdvisor, founded in 2000 and featuring more than 4 million reviews and 7 million accommodations, reaching 390 million viewers in 49 global markets, announced in October that its Viator booking service would stop selling tickets to exhibits featuring tourist contacts with captive wild and endangered animals, “including but not limited to elephant rides, petting tigers, and swim-with-dolphin attractions,” according to its website.

Under the title “Wildlife. Not entertainers,” World Animal Protection’s “10 cruellest wildlife attractions” lists at No. 4 “the world’s last remaining sea turtle farm that acts as a tourist attraction ... in the Cayman Islands,” saying the animals suffer from “stress and disease,” living “a tortured life.”

“They often panic when they are handled and it has been known for tourists to drop them, causing significant injuries which can kill turtles,” according to the list.

Between late April and July 2014, 1,268 turtles died of a Clostridium infection.

In 2015, however, TripAdvisor awarded the Cayman Turtle Centre a “Certificate of Excellence” for “accommodations, attractions and restaurants that consistently earn great reviews from travelers.” More than 1,800 opinions averaged between four and five stars for the facility, although it earned the lowest -3 rating for welfare.

In April 2016, World Animal Protection petitioned TripAdvisor as part of its “Wildlife. Not entertainers” effort, asking the company for the changes it is now making.

TripAdvisor’s October move came after six months of consultation with such animal groups as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Global Wildlife Conservation and others, according the news reports at the time.

The October announcement also included a promise that by early 2017 TripAdvisor would fully launch its

booking policy and an “education portal linked to every animal attraction listing on TripAdvisor.”

“The portal,” it said, would “provide links and information on animal welfare practices, helping travelers write more-informed reviews, and be aware of opinions on conservation implications of some tourism attractions.

“In turn, TripAdvisor believes that better reviews will enable travelers to make more informed booking decisions and improve the standards of animal care in tourism worldwide.” Mr. Hoyt said the weekend removal of Cayman Turtle Centre ticket sales was not in response to a precipitating event, but rather as the next step in the ban.

“We did immediately turn off hundreds of these attractions, [but] we also said others would be phased out over time for a number of reasons – from contract terms to needing more information about the attraction.”

Mr. D’Cruze echoed the remark: “The size and number of the attractions would [determine] progressive development, and the Carnival Cruise Line petition gave it a sense of urgency.”

He said World Animal Protection would continue collaborating with TripAdvisor to ensure compliance of other wildlife exhibits with the website’s policies.

Cayman Turtle Centre Managing Director Tim Adam rejected World Animal Protection claims, warning against “the hysteria of an activist organization’s web of deception.”

He said contacts “between tourists and wildlife is supervised, designed to ensure it is safe for the animals and the participating guests, and does not adversely affect the behavior, growth and health of the animals.”

The Turtle Centre, he said, “follows strict protocols of supervision, safety and animal care in these interactions,” pointing to “at least” twice-yearly inspections “by the constitutional authority for animal welfare matters in this jurisdiction.”

Lamenting Mr. Adam’s reluctance to address World Animal Protection directly, Mr. D’Cruze said he had approached both Carnival and TripAdvisor because “we felt we’d exhausted all communications with the [Cayman Turtle Centre] and the Cayman Islands government.

“None of our communications had been answered,” he said, “so we realized we had to look at the stakeholders and the entities that sent people” to the Cayman Turtle Centre.

While “we are engaged with all the cruise line companies,” he said, Carnival Cruise Lines is one of the global leading cruise companies.”

Carnival Cruise Lines released a statement referring any questions to the Cayman Turtle Centre.

“I can confirm that Carnival along with several other cruise lines feature the Turtle Centre within our shore excursion offerings,” said the cruise company’s spokeswoman, Jennifer de la Cruz.

“For specific information on the Turtle Centre’s practices, activities and turtle conservation programs, please reach out to them directly as they are best positioned to discuss the WAP’s concerns with you.”

World Animal Protection’s Mr. D’Cruze said his organization had engaged “in lengthy discussions” with the cruise company prior to the April 25 petition, “but we have heard nothing back. There is a complete lack of movement and we haven’t spoken to them since the petition was launched.”